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THE ALLEGED PASSING OF WAGNER.

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN.

THE process of consigning the works of Richard Wagner to the capacious dust-bin where lie the discarded products of the world's art goes energetically forward. An English critic of authority, Mr. E. A. Baughn, has lately been giving voice—in what he calls, with a touch of pathos, “the apostasy of a Wagnerian”—to doubts concerning the artistic impeccability of the tyrant of Bayreuth; not long ago Mr. Philip Hale celebrated publicly the recrudescence of Italian opera and the inferential eclipse of the music-drama according to Wagner; and now comes Mr. Reginald de Koven with tidings and prophecies of sombre import. In the April issue of this REVIEW he sought to show, in a spirit obviously free from carping and prejudice, that the decline and fall of the author of “Tristan und Isolde” was an event which had begun to cast its dire shadows into the present: he dared, in short, to announce the definitive bursting of what vivacious persons have called “the Wagner bubble,” though he did not disdain to permit a certain reverence to temper the harshness of his declaration.

Let us consider Mr. de Koven's allegations, and his reasons for the belief that is in him, since he is by far the most confident witness of Wagner's downfall who has thus far put himself upon record.

Mr. de Koven believes that he is justified in accepting New York as a reasonable criterion of operatic taste, for he regards it as, to-day, “the principal operatic centre of the world.” Proceeding then to a consideration of the past season of opera at the Metropolitan Opera House,* he affirms that New York “has

* Wagner's works are not in the répertoire of the Manhattan Opera House.

never known a season when fewer of Wagner's works have been performed." It is unfortunate that Mr. de Koven should have elected to found any part of his argument upon this assertion; for it is not true that New York "has never known a season when fewer of Wagner's works have been performed" than were performed during the past season. In any such contention as Mr. de Koven's, it may be conceded that the truth of the matter rests, in a considerable degree, upon the mere statistics of performances. Now, these statistics show that there have been, since the end of the German régime at the Metropolitan in 1891, many seasons during which Wagner was less frequently heard than during the season of 1907-08. According to the records, New York heard during the past season thirty performances of works by Wagner, and these performances were apportioned among nine operas and music-dramas: "Die Meistersinger," "Der Fliegende Holländer," "Lohengrin," "Tristan und Isolde," "Tannhäuser," "Die Walküre," "Siegfried," "Rheingold," and "Die Götterdämmerung"—all of his works that now hold the stage except "Rienzi" and "Parsifal." As against this record, we may set that of the season of 1891-92, when there were only eight performances of three of Wagner's works ("Der Fliegende Holländer," "Lohengrin," "Die Meistersinger"); the season of 1893-94, when three operas by Wagner ("Tannhäuser," "Lohengrin," "Die Meistersinger") were heard, in all, ten times; the season of 1894-95, when there were only seven performances of two works by Wagner ("Lohengrin" and "Die Meistersinger"); the season of 1895-96, when the Wagner record was twenty-one performances of five works; the season of 1896-97, with a precisely similar record; the season of 1901-02, when eight of Wagner's works yielded sixteen performances; and the season of 1902-03, when the same number of works had twenty-six performances. We need not carry the comparison further to show the degree to which Mr. de Koven has been betrayed by a too hasty or too casual assumption. The stubborn and inconvenient fact remains that Wagner was not less, but more, frequently performed in New York during the recent season than in many other seasons of the past. And these additional facts emerge: of the fifteen composers represented at the Metropolitan during the season of 1907-08, Wagner, in respect of numerical preponderance, heads the list, his nearest rivals

being Verdi and Puccini, each of whom totalled twenty-three performances of four operas. These facts are, it is true, deceptive as indexes of popularity, for the attractive or unattractive manner in which an opera is cast is, obviously, a factor which has to be very gravely reckoned with; they are recited here only because Mr. de Koven invites their exhibition.

Let us pass, then, to the succeeding portion of his testimony. Not only, says Mr. de Koven, has New York "never known a season when fewer of Wagner's works have been performed" (an assertion which we have seen to be in singular conflict with the facts), but there has never been a season "when performances of these works have aroused so little popular interest, or enlisted so scant a measure of popular support." Here Mr. de Koven is upon securer ground. It is undeniable that the Wagner performances at the Metropolitan last season were not so largely attended as they have been in previous years; yet one may be pardoned for believing that the reasons for this are not precisely those advanced by Mr. de Koven, and that they do not indicate so mournful a destiny as that imagined by our prophet of little faith: a time when, as he predicts, "the 'Music of the Future' may have become the 'Music of the Past.'"

Mr. de Koven would have us seek the reasons for the condition which he describes in three directions: "in the inherent character of the works themselves; behind the curtain among the singers; and in front of it among the audience." Mr. de Koven presents these reasons in reverse order. As regards the attitude of the public, he believes that their supposedly weakened allegiance to Wagner is due in part to the disappearance of the Wagnerites, and in part to the competing attractiveness of "the music of more modern composers who have out-Wagnered Wagner," and "have weaned away many admirers . . . in giving them newer, bolder and more vivid musical sensations." As regards conditions "behind the curtain," he holds that there are to-day no "great" Wagner singers, and that the "inferior" ones we do possess "struggle as best they may with . . . well-nigh impossible vocal conditions, or, as is now often the case, refuse these conditions altogether and decline to sing Wagner's music at all"; here Mr. de Koven is obsessed, of course, by the familiar delusion that Wagner's music is "ruinous for the voice." His third contention pertains to "the inherent character of Wagner's

art and his theories of it as exemplified in his operas and music-dramas"; but to this matter we shall come later on.

Mr. de Koven's explanations are not, as has already been remarked, completely persuasive. We may consider first those which are least plausible. As to the present lack of "great" Wagner singers: Let it be regretfully conceded that there is to-day no one familiar to the American stage capable of singing *Tristan* as Jean de Reszke used to sing the part; that there is as yet no successor to Lilli Lehmann. But to hold that there are to-day no Wagner singers of the first rank (the epithet "great" is not to be lightly applied) is to do flagrant injustice to more than a few extraordinarily fine artists. Does Mr. de Koven believe, for example, that the superb and engrossing *Kundry*, the magnetic *Isolde*, the alluring and splendid *Venus*, the insurpassable *Sieglinde*, of Mme. Fremstad are negligible achievements? Have *Wotan*, *Amfortas*, *Kurwenal*, *Wolfram*, been more impressively done than by Mr. Van Rooy? Would he maintain that Wagner has been, on the whole, less admirably sung in our day by Fremstad, Gadski, Ternina, Schumann-Heink, Homer, Van Rooy, Knote, than he was twenty years ago by Niemann, Alvary, Reichmann, Fischer, Brandt, Seidl-Krauss (the incomparable Lehmann is not to be named in any such general parallel)? Probably not. For it is a matter of fairly general agreement among those who are able to judge of the matter that the average of excellence in individual performances of Wagner is higher to-day than it was in the years when the later music-dramas were first revealed to us by singing-actors whose zeal and earnestness were as indisputable as their art was rude and inept.

Again, one must differ with Mr. de Koven when he attributes the alleged abatement of Wagnerian enthusiasm to the weaning away of many of his former admirers by "more modern composers who have out-Wagnered Wagner in giving them newer, bolder and more vivid musical sensations." Who, one wonders, are these composers? It is not easy to think of any modern composers of opera, known to America, who are writing "newer, bolder and more vivid" music than Wagner's except Claude Debussy and Richard Strauss; and the "*Pelléas et Mélisande*" of Debussy was unknown in this country until late in the past winter, while the "*Salome*" of Strauss is as yet scarcely known

here save to students and professional observers. Is Mr. de Koven thinking of Puccini, Leoncavallo, Mascagni? These are makers of music which might perhaps be characterized as "newer" than Wagner's; but "bolder"? "more vivid"? Yet Mr. de Koven has here almost stumbled upon the *crux* of the matter. It is true that Wagner's kingdom, wherein he ruled in solitary magnificence, has been invaded, and by none other than Puccini and his fellows; but it is not, one need scarcely say, any musical superiority which equipped them for that feat.

Mr. de Koven seems to feel that if the purely musical element in Wagner's stage works were more paramount and more appealing, if they possessed what he calls "more formal, salient, fluent melody," their present situation might be different. And in this he is in accord with Mr. Baughn, who blames Wagner because he did not make use of "the full resources of music and of the beautiful singing-voice in duets, concerted numbers and choruses." On the contrary, it is because Wagner was too opulently musical, because he was not Wagnerian enough, not really a faithful executant of his theories, that it is possible to find in his works to-day not only a lack of complete artistic success, but a substantial reason for a measurable slackening of his hold upon the public. He conceived himself to be primarily a dramatist, a dramatist using music solely and frankly as an auxiliary, as a means of intensifying the action and the moods of the play; and this end he pathetically imagined that he had achieved. Had any temerarious soul assured him that his dramas would survive and endure by virtue of their music alone, it is easy to fancy his mingled incredulity and anger. He was not, judged by an ideal even less uncompromising than his own, a musical dramatist at all: he was essentially—as the present deponent ventured to remark in these pages six years ago—a dramatic symphonist, a writer of programme-music who used the drama and its appurtenances, for the most part, as a mere stalking-horse for his huge and intricate and subtle orchestral tone-poems. He was seduced and overwhelmed by his own great and marvellous art, his irrepressible eloquence: his drama is distorted, exaggerated or spread to an arid thinness, to accommodate his imperious musical imagination. He called his operas by the proud title of "music-dramas"; yet often it is impossible to find the drama because of the music. He ruthlessly in-

interrupts or suspends the action of his plays or the dialogue of his personages in order that he may meditate or philosophize orchestrally; and in much of the vocal writing in his later works, dramatic consistency and truth are as unconcernedly sacrificed to the opportunity of writing triumphantly beautiful music as they are in any of the unregenerate operas which he despised. It was not, as has been said before, that he fell short, but that he went too far: he should have stopped at eloquent and pointed intensification. Instead, he smothered his none too lucid dramas in a welter of magnificent and inspired music—obscured them, stretched them to intolerable lengths, filled up every possible space in them with his wonderful tonal commentary, by which they are not, as he thought, upborne, but calamitously overweighted. He himself was one of the most formidable enemies that Wagnerism ever had. No principle of musico-dramatic construction was held by him to be more important than that the words uttered by his characters should be clearly understood. "I strove," he wrote, "to raise the dramatic dialogue itself to the main subject of musical treatment"; yet that was precisely what, in many cases, he failed to do: his vocal speech is contrived with skill and cunning, but it has to pierce through a dense orchestral web of many and rich strands, and its mere dramatic significance is frequently obscured in the process. A compromising attitude toward the orchestral commentary on the part of the conductor may do much toward bringing about a juster balance between the musical and dramatic elements; but this is often effected at the expense of much that is characteristic and essential in the quality of the music—as witness the singularly flaccid and ineffectual performance of the "*Liebestod*" which resulted last winter at the Metropolitan from Mr. Gustav Mahler's commendable desire to bring the words and the song of the transfigured *Isolde* into due prominence.

The effect of all this is lamentable. In the days when the impetus of a pristine enthusiasm drove the more intelligent order of opera-goers to performances of Wagner, it was a labor of love to read in advance the texts of his dramas; and even the guide-books, which were as leaves in Vallombrosa, were prayerfully studied. But to-day, as Mr. de Koven truthfully observes, there are no Wagnerites. We are no longer impelled by an apostolic fervor to delve curiously into the complex genealogy and elaborate ethics

of the "Ring," and it is no longer quite clear to many slothful intelligences just what Tristan and Isolde are talking about in the dusk of King Mark's garden. There will always be a small group of the faithful who, through invincible and loving study, will have learned by heart every secret of these dramas. But for the casual opera-goer, granting him all possible intelligence and intellectual curiosity, they cannot but seem the reverse of crystal-clear, logical and compact.

A score of years ago in New York those who cared at all for the dramatic element in opera, and the measure of whose delight was not filled up by the vocal pyrotechny which was the mainstay of the operas of the older *répertoire*, found their chief solace and satisfaction in the music-dramas of Wagner. He reigned then virtually alone over his kingdom. The dignity, the imaginative power and the impressive emotional sweep of his dramas, as dramas, offset their obscurity and their inordinate bulk; and always their splendid investiture of music exerted, in and of itself, an enthralling fascination. And that condition of affairs might have continued for much longer had not certain impetuous young men of modern Italy demonstrated the possibility of writing operas which were both dramatically engrossing and musically eloquent, and which had the incalculable merit, for our time and environment, of being both swift in movement and unimpeachably obvious in meaning. Thereupon began the reign of young Italy in contemporary opera. It was inaugurated with the "*Cavalleria Rusticana*" of Mascagni and the "*I Pagliacci*" of Leoncavallo; and it is continued to-day, with immense vigor and persistence, by Puccini with all his later works. The sway of the composer of "*Madame Butterfly*" is triumphant and well-nigh absolute; and the reasons for it are not elusive. He has selected for musical treatment dramas that are terse and rapid in action and intelligible in detail, and he has underscored them with music that is impassioned, incisive, highly spiced, rhetorical, sometimes poetic and ingenious, and pervadingly sentimental. Moreover, he possesses, as his most prosperous attribute, that facility in writing fervid and banal melodies which, as Mr. Henry T. Finck has observed, "give the singers opportunity to pour out their voices in that lavish volume and intensity which provoke applause as infallibly as horseradish provokes tears."

Thus we find the public offered, on the one hand, the rapidly moving, easily intelligible, and passionate music-dramas of Puccini and his kin (which do not depend for their appeal, let it be noted, upon the popularity of the singers who appear in them); and, on the other hand, the delight of witnessing the vocal necromancy whereby such gifted singers as Mr. Caruso, Mr. Bonci, and Mme. Sembrich have succeeded in galvanizing the obsolescent works of the old school into a semblance of vitality; is it any wonder that, in face of these opposing attractions, the productions of Richard Wagner—which are indubitably not “amusing,” as Mr. de Koven sadly observes—should languish in comparative desuetude?

Let us, in conclusion, admit, then, that the general public attitude toward Wagner in New York is at present a little apathetic, by reason, as it seems, of the opposing lures whose nature has been suggested. But that his works will ever suffer any very marked neglect here is not a contingency which need alarm his most timid admirer. The Wagnerites, it is true, are gone; and the validity and persuasiveness of “Tristan” and the “Ring” as dramas seem less certain than of old. But the music lives, as an independent commentary that is of almost universal scope in its voicing of the moods and emotions of men and the varied pageant of the visible world. As music, it is still, at its best, unparalleled and unapproached; and, as Pater prophesied of the poetry of Rossetti, more torches will be lit from its flame than even enthusiasts imagine. Nothing can ever dim the glory of Wagner the weaver of tones. His place is secure among the Olympians; where he sits, one likes to fancy, apart—a little lonely and disdainful. His music is both gorgeous and exquisite, epical and tender, sublimely noble, and human as passion and despair. One can at the least think of him as the subtle observer whom I have just quoted chose to think of a master of poetry: “as a superb god of art, so proudly heedless or reckless that he never notices the loss of his winged sandals, and that he is stumbling clumsily when he might well lightly be lifting his steps against the sunway where his eyes are set.”

LAWRENCE GILMAN.